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FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE

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INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 LILONGWE 000543

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)

SUBJECT: MALAWI: ELECTORAL COMMISSION CHAIR DISCUSSES PROBLEMS AND PLANS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On September 3, Charge4 d' Affaires Sullivan met with Justice Anastazia Msosa, the Chairperson of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC). Msosa acknowledged problems in the voter registration exercise and described measures to correct them. Msosa noted that the MEC had been bolstered by increased staff, and expressed confidence the GOM would not interfere with the conduct of election. She said political party monitors needed to be better trained. Monitors from political parties and the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) remain the only organizations observing voter registration throughout the nation. Msosa was also amenable to the idea of an NGO-run parallel vote count, but was unsure if any NGO in Malawi had the funding or capacity to take on the project. Comment: Despite clear challenges, the MEC is making progress in its electoral preparations and enjoys the confidence of major opposition parties. End Summary.

First Phase of Voter Registration

¶2. (SBU) On September 3, Charge Sullivan met with Justice Anastazia Msosa, the Chairperson of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) to discuss electoral preparations. Justice Msosa explained that the first phase of voter registration was extended by an additional six days due to disorganization. She blamed the head of the MEC in the central region, who failed to deliver materials and personnel to registration centers on time. She claimed that after his replacement, there was noticeable improvement in the operation of the MEC in that region. She stated that the registration period was extended nation-wide, and not in the central region alone, in order to allow for a uniform transition into the second phase. Moreover, Msosa said that the extensions would not be repeated in the additional five registration phases and that the overall schedule would remain basically intact.

¶3. (SBU) Msosa was not impressed with the conduct of political party monitors of the registration process. She said they appeared not to fully understand what their role was. She claimed that political parties had not taken up an offer of joining registration official training sessions before the registration process commenced. Msosa added that political party monitor training is still greatly needed.

Limited funding for the MEC to provide training was a major obstacle in educating political parties about the process. (Note: Outside of spot checks by observers from diplomatic missions including the U.S., monitors from political parties and the quasi-governmental National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) remain the only observers throughout Malawi. The United Democratic Front has already run into difficulties paying allowances to their monitors. The Democratic Progressive Party indicated to emboff that it would not be able to fund its party monitors much past the first phase of registration either.)

MEC Staffing Up

¶4. (U) The MEC chair reported that a new Chief Elections Officer (CEO) had just been hired a week earlier. The MEC's Deputy CEO for Administration and the Head of Finance were also recently hired. These filled key vacancies that have existed at the MEC for most of the past four years.

Parliamentary Redistricting

¶ 15. (SBU) Justice Msosa explained that although the MEC had begun a process of redemarcation of parliamentary districts, the effort had now been put on hold until after the elections. The MEC, in an attempt to be neutral, had tried to shift constituency boundaries without consulting political parties. However, the lack of input from members of Parliament led to outcries of manipulation which prompted the MEC to halt the process. Msosa added that after the 2009 election, MEC will reattempt the exercise based on the results of a national census conducted earlier this year.

Electoral Independence

¶ 16. (SBU) The MEC Chair assured the CDA that neither President Mutharika nor other members of the ruling party were interfering in the workings of the MEC. She said that while government was very supportive -- especially financially -- MEC commissioners were making decisions independently on the issues before them.

¶ 17. (SBU) Justice Msosa welcomed the CDA's suggestion of a parallel vote count conducted by civil society monitors to corroborate results from the tallying system from the MEC - as long as the parallel count used official results from polling stations. However, she pointed out that the Malawi Electoral Support Network (MESN), like most other NGOs in Malawi, was not currently in a position to conduct such a parallel count. She attributed MESN's failings to recent leadership changes as well as a lack of capacity and finances. Msosa also stated that while the EU-funded NICE was

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the most highly-regarded and well-funded organization working in the elections process, NGOs do not recognize it as a peer organization because of its quasi-government nature. NICE's involvement in a parallel tally could hurt the credibility of the outcome, she suggested.

What if the Lights Go Out?

¶ 18. (SBU) MEC officials gave the Charge and emboffs a tour of the organization's headquarters in Blantyre, including computer and power systems critical to maintaining the integrity of the elections. Emboffs inspected a large generator encased in a locked building that officials said would guarantee power to the MEC in the event of a blackout, as well as a number of uninterrupted power source (UPS) units to keep databases running until the generator kicks in. Systems experts also described the servers that were storing computerized identification data coming in from voter registration centers. MEC staff noted that while voter id's were computerized, the voting process itself would still rely on paper ballots and boxes.

Making Progress, But Issues Remain

¶ 19. (SBU) Comment: The MEC is doing as well as could be expected given its late start and delayed funding. Msosa is clearly trying to improve the MEC's processes, but staff capacity and training issues continue to cause problems. Msosa continues to lean heavily on trusted advisors like commissioner Georgina Chikoko and Chief Elections Officer David Bandawe. Both held the same positions under Msosa when she chaired Malawi's successful 1994 elections. While Msosa's contract as chair of the MEC expires at the end of October, most expect it to be renewed. Even former president Muluzi (who did not renew her contract in 1998) has publicly expressed support for her continued chairmanship, and MCP leader John Tembo also expressed his support for her to the Charge in a separate, private conversation. Msosa's enthusiasm for greater training of political party monitors and a parallel tally center are encouraging, but the burden to fund such activities will clearly fall on foreign aid donors who have already committed most of their governance budgets to fund registration equipment and civic education efforts.

SULLIVAN